

Sermon for Pentecost 11-St Mungo's All-Age Service- 2022

'More than a healing'

After a first reading through today's gospel about the healing of a crippled woman (Luke 13 v10-17) taking shape, it struck me that Jesus had to have been very observant to spot her deformed body in the first place. In my mind was a picture of the typical synagogue with a high-sided gallery in which women were segregated from men, kept away from the action and expected to stay silent. The picture was partly formed by Paul's instructions of how women should conduct themselves during worship (1 Cor 14 v34). Noticing a frail woman, bent double and keeping herself to herself in an enclosure would take some doing. Then I thought I had better check vision with reality and my perspective suddenly changed.

My picture (was it yours too?) belonged to the 4th or 5th, not the 1st Century. The reality in 1st C was that women and men mixed freely in what were often largely undivided, unfurnished, large spaces. Women were allowed to contribute to proceedings though not to read from the scrolls 'out of respect for the congregation', whatever that meant. Attending the synagogue on the sabbath was not obligatory but if you did attend, you would often find yourself following the Amidah, a service of prayer consisting of Eighteen Benedictions: some of these might be read aloud by one of the women, while all turned to face Jerusalem. Everyone knew the words because the devout Jew was supposed to say these Benedictions to themselves four times a day.

After three Benedictions dealing with basic tenets of Judaism, came a series dealing with particular needs of the people. No. 8 would have been particularly poignant for the cripple woman: it was this prayer for healing

Heal us, O L-rd, and we shall be healed; save us and we shall be saved; for You are our praise. Grant a perfect healing to all our wounds; for You, almighty King, are a faithful and merciful Physician. Blessed art thou O L-rd, who heals the sick of Your people Israel.

So, our crippled woman had gone voluntarily to the synagogue on that sabbath: how often she went we do not know but she may have been a familiar presence. In that plain space, her disability was plain for all to see and had been endured for years. Every sabbath, the synagogue prayed for people like her- that God would be so good as to intervene and heal all such ailments. Whether or not anyone ever bothered to tend to the woman's needs we know not but Jesus did so, and the shock may have helped to straighten her. The narrow-minded criticism from the head of the synagogue for improper sabbath observance fully deserved the riposte from Jesus. Such rules were there to be broken; everything must change. The breakthrough moment was marked by an accolade from Jesus: the woman should be called a daughter of Abraham.

Other gospels tell stories about Jesus being criticised for healing on the sabbath: in Mark, a man with a shrivelled hand was cured (Mk 3 v 1-6); in John, sabbath healings had become something of a habit, were not confined to the synagogue and the individual suffering had gone on twice as long as in Luke (Ch 5 v1-18). Such stories may have a wider significance as a critique of Judaism's centuries-long neglect of those that suffer, while waiting on G-d (a name they dare not to speak) to intervene. The Amidah had Benedictions to cover other types of suffering and No. 9 was this prayer for deliverance from want:
Bless this year unto us, O L-rd our G-d, together with every kind of the produce, for our welfare; give a blessing upon the face of the earth. O satisfy us with your goodness and bless our year like other good years. Blessed art thou, O L-rd, who blesses the years.

Once a year, the synagogue congregation would have heard today's Old Testament scripture from Isaiah 58 read from the scrolls (v 1-9), criticising another Jewish ritual, that of fasting, which did nothing for those who had no food. The leader of the synagogue would have presided over periods of fasting, and his predecessors had kept the practice going for centuries after Isaiah III had the vision. God was calling upon his chosen people to buck their ideas up and had great

expectations of them. I chose "I The Lord of Sea and Sky" (NHWS 163) to be sung after reading from Isaiah, hoping to reinforce Isaiah's message sequence. God, Lord of Sea & Sky and everything betwixt and between is aware of cries for help, whether as Benedictions from the synagogue on that Sabbath or ours this morning. But what he wanted then and wants now was and is for the petitioners to step up to the plate and be part of the solution, not an echo chamber for complaints and requests.

It's not as though they were not equipped, and we are not equipped. A few weeks back we read from the previous chapter in Luke of Jesus' promise that the Father had chosen to give the little flock of disciples the kingdom, no less. The sabbath healing was a sign of that kingdom: Jesus' religious critics were upset and disturbed by what He said and did but the people loved it, so Luke says. They were mostly poor and the pattern Jesus inaugurated, if followed, offered them hope.

In her latest book "Freeing Jesus", Diana Butler Bass suggests that we can make that word 'kingdom' more meaningful by dropping the 'g' to make 'kindom', a world in which everyone put the needs of others before their own. That's the vision that inspired today's act of healing in Luke and the broader vision of Isaiah in today's OT reading. The criticism from the leader of the synagogue was a 'kingdom' attribute. The Benedictions he presided over were a kingdom attribute. In our troubled world today, the problems and the solutions are the same as those faced by Isaiah and Jesus. Church leaders must emerge from the cloistered shell of ritual and dogma to mitigate the mounting problems that people face. People for whom religion means little or nothing may thus be given hope and Isaiah's dream [Is 58 v8-9] become reality.

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